

REASONS FOR BEING HOMELESS AMONG SINGLE HOMELESS MEN IN

DENVER

by

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Thesis directed by Professor Jana Everett

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the primary reasons for homelessness among a group of thirteen single homeless men in Denver, Colorado. The participants' stories were in response to a query concerning how they became homeless. There were multiple reasons for being homeless among these single homeless men in Denver. However, the primary reasons among this group of people were economic conditions and high cost of living, alcohol and drug problems (substance abuse), and family issues.

The study was aimed to find whether single homeless men's own behavioral problems and laziness are the major factor contributing to their situations. The result of the study does not support the idea that homeless and the behavioral problems are the leading factors. Homeless people do not want to be the way they are.

This abstract accurately represents the content of the candidate's thesis. I recommend its publication.

Signed



Jana Everett

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## CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
Summary.....	17
3. HOMELESSNESS IN DENVER, CO.....	19
Summary.....	27
Research Methodology.....	28
4. THE FINDINGS.....	34
Economic and High Cost of Living.....	43
Substance Abuse.....	45
Family Issues.....	47
Homelessness as a Life Style.....	50
Summary and Conclusion.....	53
5. SERVICES PROVIDED FOR DENVER'S HOMELESS....	56
Recommendations and Predictions.....	61
REFERENCES CITED.....	65

## TABLES

### Table

1. Persons below poverty lines.....	8
2. Median family income.....	9
3. Numbers of the homeless in Denver and the Colorado as a whole.....	22
4. Demographic characteristics of homeless adults in Colorado.....	24
5. Demographic characteristics of the sample.....	36
6. Multiple reasons for being homeless among the sample.....	42

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a resident of Denver, I have observed and faced many homeless people on the street, by the creek, and even in the university campus. I have seen how they have dealt with their daily lives. On the basis of my observation and curiosity, I have decided to conduct a study for my thesis about homeless people in Denver for a number of reasons. It is a major social problem, but policy makers and even the public do not take it seriously, or they ignore the problem. The homeless are neglected people due to the fact that they have been labeled lazy, alcoholic, druggie, junkies, dangerous, mentally ill, etc. As a result, society discriminates against them.

This thesis investigates the primary contributing factors to homelessness among single homeless men in Denver, Colorado. In order to address this issue, the problem of the homeless will be discussed in general. Then, the reasons for being homeless among single homeless men in Denver will be examined. A majority of the public may believe that an individual's behavior and laziness are the most important factors that lead to homelessness. So, this study is conducted to explore these issues and to see whether they have any merit or not.

The ideas that the homeless are lazy and that homelessness is caused by the

homeless themselves may represent the beliefs of those who are well-off who have not experienced the bitter side of life. For example, Reagan, Bush, and their cabinet members more often blamed the victims. In regard to the homeless issue, Reagan stated that homeless people "choose their own condition" (Sweeney, 1993, p.58 ). At the same time, his secretary of Housing and Urban Development claimed that the homeless wanted to be there and Attorney General Edwin Meese also claimed that people eat in soup kitchens "because it is cheap" (Sweeney, 1993, p.58 ). These anti-poor slurs by a group of people who made decisions for the society and its members are sickening and dangerous to a majority of the public. The remarks made by these people are indications of their ideology.

Throughout the next chapters, the problem of the homeless both in the U.S. and especially in Denver, Colorado will be discussed. Chapter two will cover the literature review which reveals the crisis of the homeless in the United States. It also discusses different perspectives of many researchers about the number of homeless, the causes of homelessness, and possible solutions. Chapter three covers homelessness in Denver, Colorado, the estimated number of the homeless in Denver metropolitan area and in the rest of the state. Included in this chapter are researchers' analysis of the factors contributing to homelessness in Denver and the state as a whole. Also, in this chapter, the

methodology of the research will be discussed. Chapter four includes the findings of this research. In this chapter, I discuss the realities of 13 homeless single men in Denver and explore how they became homeless. Chapter five covers the services provided for Denver's homeless. This chapter includes the agencies I have visited during my research such as Samaritan House, Denver Rescue Mission and St. Francis Center.

For the integrity of the research, I have changed the names of all interviewees and some of their characteristics

## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Homelessness is a major urban social problem not only in Colorado, but in elsewhere in the United States as well. Homelessness has been defined in many ways and there is disagreement in regard to its definition. The term homeless is used to describe people who are transient, poor, socially isolated, live in cheap places and lack fixed or regular residence. They most often reside in public or private operated shelters or public or private places not designed for sleeping (Jahiel, 1992).

Homelessness has become a chronic condition for many people in the United States; approximately 25% of the homeless population have been continuously homeless for more than two years. Similarly, more than 50% of the homeless population have been homeless more than once (Clasy et al, 1994). The population of the homeless in the United States was reported to be three million by the Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1984, and in the same year HUD reported that only 110,000 homeless persons could be sheltered on any given night (Ford Foundation, 1989).

There are no accurate numbers of the homeless in the United States, and

there are many disagreements over the causes and the solutions to the problem of homelessness. One major problem which may lead to disagreements over the numbers of the homeless is that each researcher not only approaches the problem with different perspectives and from different angles, but political ideology also plays an important role in data collection. Some researchers have determined that there are between two to three million homeless people in America (Greer, 1986). Others such as Bender (1990) argue that there is a much lower number of homeless in the United States. He maintains that advocates for homeless people inflate figures in order to generate more sympathy for the homeless. On the other hand, The National Alliance to End Homelessness (1994) claims that on any given night, 750,000 Americans will be without shelter and more than two million Americans will be homeless sometimes during a year. Jahiel (1992) and Wolch (1993) argue that the numerical estimates of homelessness tend to be based on simple definitions that could be readily operationalized. They typically rely on counts of the number of people served by shelter operators plus "guesstimates" of the population beyond such services. The number and composition of people homeless at some time during any year is likely to be larger than the figures that are given by many researchers. It is difficult to estimate with any accuracy, due to the lack of information, the duration of homeless episodes. The mobility of the homeless

people, the lack of an address, their diffusion through communities, and movement in and out of homelessness make it more difficult to obtain accurate estimates of this population.

According to Wolch and Dear (1993), families, usually a woman and two children, make up 20 to 30 percent of the homeless people in the United States. They add that most have multiple disabilities, for example, mental illness and drug abuse. And more than half of the homeless population are minorities. In spite of controversy over baseline figures, service providers report dramatic increases in the demand for emergency food and shelter in 1989, 1990 and 1991 (Wolch and Dear, 1993).

Coping with life without a home is a stressful, life threatening, and time-consuming challenge. Every day, homeless people are faced with the task of securing food, shelter, and other necessities of life. Once on the streets, they do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival. They draw deeply on personal strength, their peer groups, and the resources in the surrounding environment.

The increase in poverty and homelessness in the United States is a tragedy. In 1975 there were about 25.9 million of poor people in the United States (Sweeney, 1993). According to Sweeney, by 1985, 13 percent of the population or 33.1 million people fell below poverty line and in 1991 the number increased to 35.7 million people (Sweeney, 1993). It is sad to see a large number of

people living below the poverty line, and it is hard for them to have a normal life: meeting basic human needs for food, shelter and clothing. The seriousness of the problem has led many researchers to conduct research at local, state and federal levels.

The causes of homelessness are many, and as with the issue of the size of the homeless population, there is disagreement among researchers. Some experts point to the shortage of affordable housing as the root cause of homelessness. Ringheim (1993, p. 624) argues that homelessness is most frequently a result of a mismatch between the cost of housing and the income of the poor. She adds, while rich people can choose the type of housing, neighborhood and lifestyle they want to live, poor people have little chance to do so. Research done by Ford Foundation (1989) indicates that in the 1970s a poor family spent about 30 percent of its income for housing, but in 1985 they were spending 58 percent of their income for housing. Between 1974-85 median rent expense increased by 11 percent (Ford Foundation, 1989).

Wright and Lam (1987) also claim that homelessness is a housing problem. Housing in the United States has become more expensive in recent decades. For example, the average price of single-family dwelling sold in 1970 was \$23,000; in 1980, the figure was \$62,000, and in 1983, \$70,300. They add, more to the present point, the median gross monthly rent for renter-occupied units has

shown an equivalent trend: In 1970, the median monthly rent was \$108; in 1980, \$243; and in 1983, \$315. In most cities of the United States, of course, low-income housing consists mainly of rental units. Wright and Lam also claim that in the past decade as in the present, a lot has been written about the low-income housing crisis, especially in the big cities. However, the correlation between this housing crisis and the rise of homelessness has not been discussed. For clarifying the above argument, I include some data about the income of people during 1970s and 1980s. Table 1 shows the numbers of persons who fell below poverty level, and table two indicates the average family income in the United States for 1980 to 1987.

Table 1  
Persons Below Poverty Line

<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent Below</u>	<u>Millions of Poor</u>	<u>Income</u>
1960	22.0	39.9	\$3,022
1965	17.0	33.2	\$3,223
1970	13.0	25.4	\$3,968
1975	12.0	25.9	\$5,500
1980	13.0	29.3	\$8,414
1985	14.0	33.1	\$10,989
1990	13.5	33.6	\$13,359
<u>1991</u>	<u>14.2</u>	<u>35.7</u>	<u>\$13,924</u>

Source: Sweeney, 1993

Table 2

<u>Median Family Income</u>	
<u>Year</u>	<u>Income (dollars)</u>
1980	21,023
1981	22,388
1982	23,433
1983	24,674
1984	27,735
1985	29,458
1986	29,458
<u>1987</u>	<u>30,853</u>

Source: Ruggies, 1990

In 1970, 25.4 million people of the United States were poor or were below the poverty level. Their median income, based on a family of four, was \$5500. In 1980, 29.3 million Americans fell below the poverty level and their income was \$8,414. In 1985, 14 percent or about 33.1 million people were below the poverty line and the family income was \$10,989 (Sweeney, 1993). The median income reported for 1970, 1980 and 1985 were for those who fell under the poverty line. However, the median family income for those who did not fall below the poverty level in 1980 was \$21,023, in 1981, \$22,388 and in 1985 it

was \$29,458.

Many researchers identify poverty as the main root of the homeless problem. Poverty's true horror extends into all aspects of an individual's life. Susceptibility to disease, limited or lack of access to most types of services and information, lack of control over resources, and subordination to higher social and economic classes became the norm for a poor person (Durning, 1990). Durning adds, besides these physical dimensions of poverty, the psychological toll is equally severe with an erosion of human dignity and self-respect. Unfortunately, even the most basic poverty indicator, income, is hardly monitored in discussions of homelessness. Greater inequality leads to rising poverty as well as absolute poverty. Although poverty does not discriminate, the most severely affected are minorities, female-headed households, and the young.

The federal government defined poverty as an annual income of \$ 8,737 or less for a family of three in 1980. The poverty line for a family of four was \$14,000 in 1993. At the minimum wage of \$ 4.25 an hour, a person working 40 hours a week made \$ 8,160 a year before taxes (Government's task force, 1988, Sweeney, 1993). Absolute poverty is defined as the lack of sufficient income in cash or kind to meet the most basic human needs, food, clothing and shelter (Durning, 1990 ).

Analysis of the income of the poor and the cost of housing clearly indicates a mismatch between the two. Therefore, as long as the gap between the cost of housing and the income stays the same or does not get closer, we should not expect to see a solution to homeless problems, rather we should expect more homeless in the future.

Lamb and Talbott (1986) believe that mental illness causes homelessness. They argue that the chronically and severely mentally ill are not able to cope with the stresses of this world. Therefore, they are vulnerable to eviction from their living arrangements, sometimes because of an inability to deal with difficult or even ordinary landlord-tenant situations, and sometimes because of circumstances in which they play a leading role.

James Wright (1988) sees a correlation between an increase in the numbers of homeless in the United States and the change in the global economy. He claims that changes in the national and the world economies have led to increasing demands for a technically trained and highly skilled labor force. At the same time, there has been a decline in the demand for unskilled labor. As a result, those with no skill or marginal skills will be out of a job which puts them at high risk to be homeless. Clasy and Roades (1994) state that lack of education and income not only leads to homelessness, but chronic homelessness.

Some such as Classyn and Roades (1994) argue that lack of social

connection is a big factor that contributes to homelessness. Many researchers suggest that those who become homeless are characterized by a long-term lack of social connections, in some cases beginning with childhood abandonment or abuse. They, especially the younger people, have tendencies to drift away from their families or from a board and care home. They may try to escape the pull of dependency or may want more freedom to drink or to use street drugs. Some people may be life-long isolates, tired of their conventional lives, and therefore, they gradually or suddenly take to the road, breaking all affiliative bonds (James, 1988, Rosenthal, 1994).

A study done by Davey (1993) claims that failed or misguided social policies have helped to create, increase, and perpetuate homelessness. In some cases the results have been so bad that policies seem irrational. Davey argues that conservatives who blame homelessness on drug addiction, laziness, family breakdown, alcoholism, and lack of responsibility are themselves the cause of homelessness. He states that during the Reagan era, cuts in federal housing assistance, drops in monthly Aid to Families with Dependent Children payments, and cuts in low income housing forced many people into the streets of America. The cutbacks have also led to an increase in the number of people living at or below the poverty line. Median monthly AFDC payments for family of three dropped from \$520 in 1986 to \$366 in 1980 and to \$325 in 1985. In

1975, there were 25.9 million people living below the poverty level, 42 percent of them were receiving AFDC. In 1990, however, there were 33.6 million people in poverty and only 33 percent of them received AFDC. During the Reagan era more funds were spent on defense and military technology and less on urban social problems such as homelessness (Albelda, et all, 1988, Davey, 1993).

Davey (1993) believes that direct federal government help is the major step toward solving the problem of homelessness. He claims that the federal government cuts in public housing during Reagan and Bush had a shattering effect on homeless people. In order to understand the role that the Reagan administration played in homelessness, it is important to recognize that the effects of federal cut in low-income housing are not immediately noticed. A cut in low-income housing during Reagan's final budget led to an increase in numbers of the poor and created homelessness for some years to come. To see the impact of Reagan's administration on homeless, it is better to look at his budget cuts for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 1981, budget authorization for HUD was \$32.2 billion, by 1989 it was slashed to \$6.9 billion, a deduction of 78%. Since 1980, federal housing programs have been cut more than 75%, from \$32 billion to \$7.5 billion, a deduction of 80% after being adjusted for inflation. These budget cuts meant for many American

having no place to call home (Yvonne, 1996, Davey, 1993).

Federal and local policies have often acted to reduce the supply of affordable housing. Federal tax laws have traditionally rewarded practices that led to escalating housing costs. On a local level, gentrification has been encouraged and supported by city governments hungry for higher income residents with disastrous consequences for low income housing (Rosenthal, 1994). Rosenthal also does not believe that homelessness is the result of individuals' irresponsibility or incompetence. She argues that, if homeless people were simply slackers and lackers, the homeless population would be drawn from all economic classes. Instead, homeless people are mainly drawn from a larger group who are already in very bad financial situations, and who have been poor for an extended period of time.

A typology of homelessness which was first developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development divides the homeless into three categories. One group of the homeless is chronically homeless. This group of homeless people have been homeless and possibly are going to be homeless for a long period of time. Chronically homeless people have mental illness and substance abuse problems. The second group among the homeless population are the situational homeless. This group of homeless people are those who face acute family problems or family crises which lead them to temporary

homelessness. The third group are "economically" homeless and these are the people who become homeless mostly as a result of economic crises (James, 1995). This group of people may come and go out of homelessness until they find jobs to support themselves.

The fact is that most communities have done nothing to help the homeless. NIMBY (not in my backyard) sentiments are used as an excuse for inaction and political leadership has been conspicuously absent at all levels of government (Wolch and Dear 1993). According to Wolch and Dear, many citizens do not oppose the community care for the homeless in theory, but when it comes to reality, they often oppose the setting of facilities near their residence. Business organizations and the upper class neighborhoods are the loudest and the most serious oppositional voices. They express concerns over potential neighborhood deterioration and threats to their personal security. They use the zoning laws to restrict any development which does not offer a direct monetary gain. Wolch (1988) claims that although there is opposition within communities and business organizations in regard to homeless programs and facilities, the opponents are a small, local, but vocal minority.

Several studies argue that there are resources for homeless people to use, but due to the inability of the homeless they often cannot gain access to services. Wolch and Dear (1993) argue that the provision of homeless services

is geographically uneven. This makes it hard for those in need to access the available services. The geographical inequality in service provision raises questions of social injustice. Why should the homeless people have to travel to access services? Why should only a few communities bear the cost of care for the homeless? How can other communities ignore caring for their needy? In answering these questions, many researchers may generally see the social injustice in social policies and policy makers.

According to Jahiel (1992), there are two ways to solve the homeless problem. The first is to recognize the problems with the system and confront these head on. This can be done by reforming the inequitable distribution of wealth in the society through revision of the tax structure, by constructing affordable housing for poor people and developing a universal health care system, and by guaranteeing income above the poverty level for those who can not work.

Greer (1986) also believes that the federal government has not helped the homeless and it has distanced and ignored its responsibility to homeless people. The federal government has relied upon the efforts of churches, private charities, volunteers, and the efforts of local governments to shelter the homeless. These efforts have brought millions of nights of shelter to homeless people in America, but the efforts suffer in the absence of a national policy.

The majority of researchers believe that the problem of homelessness and other urban social problems are result of inequality. Uneven distribution of resources should be narrowed by the help of government. However, Murray (1984) believes that the federal government has done too much and argues that the federal government's effort and help to poor has backfired. He maintains that assistance programs create a dependency which does more harm than good. Murray concludes that the nation and the condition of the poor will be improved through the elimination of all assistance programs, including subsidized housing.

### Summary

A review of the literature reveals the fact that homelessness is a chronic condition for many people in the United States. Although the problem has received attention both in local and federal level, nothing serious has been done to solve the problem.

There is no accurate number of the homeless populations in the United States. One major problem which may have led to the disagreement over the number of the homeless is that each researcher approaches the problem with different perspectives and from different angles. Some argue that this number is about two to three million, others estimated that the number for homeless is 750,00 to two million during a year.

The causes of homelessness are many. A shortage of housing and lack of skills and jobs are concerns to some researchers. On the other hand, others believe that lack of social connection and mental illnesses are major contributing factors.

It is not easy to solve the homeless problem. However, equal redistribution of resources in the society, developing a universal health care system and guaranteeing income above the poverty level for those who cannot work can help to solve the problem. Creating jobs and subsidized housing for the poor who are willing and ready to work are other major issues that can help to solve the homeless problem.

Finally, to solve the homeless crisis, the federal government has to take the problem seriously and take the major steps toward this issue.

## Chapter 3

### HOMELESSNESS IN DENVER, COLORADO

In this chapter, the problem of the homeless in Denver, Colorado will be discussed. The chapter discusses research on the factors contributing to homelessness and on the estimated number of homeless in Denver and the state of Colorado as a whole.

Homelessness in Colorado is not a new phenomena. It has been a social problem since 1930s, but it has grown and increased more in the Denver area during 1970s and 1980s. Studies show a great increase in the number of homeless single women during 1975 (Gerboth et al, 1995). According to Gerboth and others, in Denver, 1,800 residents were reported as homeless in 1978. The situation of homeless continued to worsen. By 1980s, during the Reagan and Bush era, the trickle-down economy policy with its emphasis on military spending left the domestic economy and the majority of workers and their families defenseless. Cutting social services, deeper cuts in welfare, fierce competition and constricting housing options across the nation made more and more people unemployed and increased the number of the homeless (Albelda et al, 1988).

As in other regions of the United States, there is a disagreement about the accurate figures and the causes of homelessness in Denver. The Colorado Governor's Task force for the Homeless (1988) reported that in 1985, 133,000 households in Colorado paid more than 30 percent of their income for housing, placing them at "risk category." A follow up report in 1989 showed Colorado had 3,115 homeless individuals including 500 children, at a given time, while between 10,000 and 12,000 people were homeless over the course of the year (Governor's Task Force, 1988; Liptack, 1992).

In 1990 the State population of homeless people was 3,080: 2,950 homeless people were estimated from the survey, and 130 additional homeless people were known to service agencies in rural counties lacking shelters or food lines for the homeless. Of the 2,950 homeless estimated from the survey 560 were children (Gerboth et al, 95). The estimated number of homeless people in 1990 represents a 10 percent increase from 1988. Numbers of children in families were estimated to have increased rapidly, from 345 in 1988 to 560 in 1990 (James, 1991).

James (1991) published research on the changing pattern of homeless in Colorado, 1988-90. He noted that while there was a 10 percent increase among homeless population, there was also a 62 percent increase in families and children among homeless. A survey done by Graduate School of Public Affairs

of the University of Colorado at Denver in 1988 and 1990 (Gerboth, et al, 1995), suggests that at risk people are mainly indigent, people with chronic mental illness or substance abuse problem, African American and to a lesser extent Hispanic, young males, and people who recently spent time in jail. In 1988, 80 percent of homeless population in Colorado were men; 75 percent of these homeless people were single, living alone, and 60 percent were under forty years of age. In addition, 26 percent of Colorado's homeless was made up of adult parents and children living together (Governor's Task Force, 1988).

Based on data gathered by Denver Rescue Mission (1994), in Metro Denver alone, the number of homeless people is estimated to be 2,060 on any given day. During any given year, more than 7,000 will be homeless in Metro Denver, and about 9,500 to 11,000 in Colorado. About 60 percent of the homeless in Denver are from Denver Metro area.

The growth in numbers of homeless people is not an artifact of improved coverage of shelters for the homeless in 1990. James (1995) stated that about two-third of homeless in the state of Colorado are in the metropolitan area. There were about 220 families with children in the state and almost 560 homeless children in the same year. The increase in numbers of homeless families occurs mainly among single parent families with children. Table three presents estimates of numbers of homeless adults and children in the Denver

Metropolitan Area and the rest of the state as a whole during 1988-1990.

Table 3

<u>Numbers of the homeless in Denver and the State as a whole</u>				
	<u>1988</u>	<u>1990</u>		
		Number	Change	Percent
Denver Metropolitan Area				
Adults	1,550	1,610	60	3.9
Children	265	375	110	41.5
Total	1,815	1,985	170	9.4
Rest of the State				
Adult	710	780	70	9.9
Children	80	185	105	131.3
Total surveyed	790	965	175	22.2
Including rural homeless				
not surveyed	990	1,095	105	10.6
Colorado				
Adults	2,260	2,390	130	5.8
Children	345	560	215	62.3
Total surveyed	2,605	2,950	345	13.2
Including rural homeless				
not surveyed	2,805	3,080	275	9.8

Source: Graduate School of Public Affairs of the University of Colorado at Denver analysis of Colorado Homeless Surveys: April 1988 and April 1990.

Based on this survey, homelessness increased in both the Denver metropolitan area by 9 percent and in the rest of the state by 11 percent. Despite the increase of homelessness outside the metropolitan area, 64 percent of homeless people in the state are estimated to have been in the metropolitan area in 1988 and in 1990. The survey indicates several disturbing changes in Colorado's homeless population, in spite of the ability of the state to meet its

immediate needs. The number of the homeless families has increased by 68 percent. The increase in the number of homeless families occurred particularly among single-parent families, from 55 in 1988 to 155 in 1990. Based on the survey, 21 percent were employed in 1990 in comparison to 30 percent in 1988. The lower rate of employment suggest that the homeless of 1990 were more isolated from the labor force than in 1988. There has been also change in composition of homeless population in term of age, gender and race. As table four shows, the median age of homeless people was thirty- five years in 1990, and thirty-one in 1988. In both years, about 80 percent were male, and 60 percent were Anglo, non-Hispanic white.

Table 4

Demographic characteristics of Homeless Adults in Colorado: 1988-1990

<u>Figures are percent of total</u>	<u>1988</u>	<u>1990</u>
<b>Age</b>		
under 20	8	6
20-29	27	27
30-39	33	32
40-49	18	20
50 or more	14	14
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	20	23
Male	80	77
<b>Race and Ethencity</b>		
Anglo	58	60
African American	16	13
Hispanic	17	15
Native American	6	10
Asian	1	1
Other	2	2

Source: Graduate School of Public Affairs of the University of Colorado at Denver.

According to James (1995), 20 percent of the homeless population in Colorado falls under chronically homeless, 10 percent under situationally homeless and about two-thirds are economically homeless.

Colorado's homeless also appear to lack access to social services.

Participation rates in social services programs were low, even when the respondents could be assumed to be eligible for aid. For example, all homeless people are eligible for food stamps, but only 18 percent of the homeless said that they were receiving them in 1988 (Gerboth, et al, 1995).

I agree with James that homelessness represents a social failure as well as a personal one. However, most research done in the past have "blamed the victims" by focusing on personal rather than social factors.

Factors contributing to homelessness in the state of Colorado are the same as those in other regions of the United States. In Colorado, the Homeless Action Group (1988) has specified several reasons which have contributed to the problem of homeless in Denver, and they are as follows:

- . The high cost of living
- . Lack of income
- . The loss of affordable housing
- . Structural change in the job market
- . Domestic violence
- . Substance and alcohol abuse
- . Failure of social policy
- . Limited economic opportunity

Liptack (1992) believes that the housing situation is the primary problem in

Denver. The last decade has seen a rise in the demand for housing by post-war baby-boomer households headed by women and single young professionals. He states that Denver's attempts at urban renewal have only added to the housing problem. Denver lost over 3,000 low-income housing units as a result of its development efforts in the recent past. Liptack adds, that housing units often were lost due to development projects which were either subsidized by the government or facilitated by zoning requirements and other governmental regulation.

In Denver, as in other cities, public support of shelters often depends on location, size, and design. There are always major disputes centering around zoning ordinances that limit the number of homeless shelters in a given neighborhood.

Poverty, which is the root of many problems such as homelessness, substance abuse, and domestic violence has not been taken seriously. It is a major issue in the state but, the public and the media seldom talk about it. It really doesn't take too much complicated research and a lot of statistical work to find out who is poor and who is not. We can see the poor on the street, on the shopping mall, on the bus-line, and everywhere else, these people are recognizable. Their income, if they have any, does not allow them to pay their rent and other basic needs. According to Bailey and others (1994), in 1979,

13.7 percent of the Denver's population was poor, whereas in 1989 the number of poor increased to 17.1 percent or about 78,515 people, a change of 3.4 percent. They add that a family of two earned \$6,310 in 1989 and about \$9,410 in 1993.

According to Roy Romer, the Governor of Colorado (Rock Mountain News, Feb. 2, 1997), people spend 50, 60, and even 70 percent of their income on housing. Tony Hernandez, a chief of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for Colorado states that nearly 80,000 Coloradans are paying more than half of their gross income on rent. In regard to the same issue, Tom Hart, director of the Colorado Division of Housing states that "income has gone up 13 percent in the past five years, but rents have gone up 60 percent" (Rocky Mountain News Feb. 2, 1997).

As I see these data, I wonder, how people can get out of the poverty and homelessness. One thing that angers me more than anything else is why nothing serious has been done to solve this problem when those people in power already know about the situation and the crisis.

### Summary

The problem of homelessness in Colorado has been a social problem since 1930s, but the homeless crisis increased in 1970s-1980s.

Like other parts of the United States, there are no accurate numbers of

homeless in the State of Colorado. It has been estimated that there are about 3000 to 9,500 homeless people. Whatever the number of homeless is, the problem has remained unsolved.

Contributing factors to homelessness in Denver and in the state of Colorado are similar with those of other regions of the United states. The major contributing factors are: high cost of living, lack of jobs, economic insecurities and lack of skills. Poverty seems to be at the root of the problem. People can not afford to pay for housing and for their other basic needs such as food, clothing, and health care.

Many of the Colorado's homeless lack access to available social services. Although a majority of them are eligible for food stamps, many do not receive them. As with the U.S. as a whole, two problems exist with social services: One is the cuts and another is people can not access social services even when they exist.

### **Research Methodology**

Since homelessness is a broad subject, the scope of the research was narrowed to focus on one particular group of homeless: single homeless men in Denver and their accounts reflecting the reasons for being homeless. The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the factors contributing to homelessness and whether or not the behavior of the homeless themselves, their

attitudes as well as mental illness and substance abuse, were among the leading factors as many people may believe or whether structural factors were more important.

The research proceeded with a few goals in mind: to obtain first-hand information in regard to the major reasons of homelessness, to do a comparison among those homeless whom I interviewed on the streets and those in the shelters and also to find out if the reasons for homelessness were the same between whites and minorities. In addition, I tried to find out how many of these homeless I interviewed fall under the category of chronically, situational or temporary homeless.

My research took the form of interviews among the homeless men through homeless shelters and homeless gathering places. For the interviews, I did not use a questionnaire, rather I used open-ended questions from an interview guide. For example, I started with a general question such as why the person is homeless and what led him to be in the situation as he is in? Then, I interjected and asked more questions, and probed, when needed or when I felt that the interviewee's answer was insufficient. Some of the other questions such as: How long has he been homeless? Where did he work before? Where is he now at the present time? were also included. I believe that this type of unstructured interview would enable homeless men to talk about their own feelings and

experiences regarding their problems in their own words without putting words in their mouths. Moreover, this kind of unstructured interview provides an opportunity for the researcher to become involved personally in the conversation and ask for clarification if needed.

For the study, 13 homeless, single men were selected from the shelters and on the streets. The homeless whom I interviewed on the streets were in different geographical locations within the Denver metro area. In addition to the 13 persons whom I interviewed formally, I talked to many other homeless during my research. The average time spent on each interview was sixty minutes. This varied with each homeless man I interviewed. The method of data collection was mainly field notes with some tape recordings with the respondent's permission. The face-to face interviews gave me the opportunity to obtain individuals' family and educational background, job history, alcohol and drug use and other first hand information regarding their situations.

Face-to- face interviews were also conducted with directors and coordinators of the shelters operating in downtown Denver such as Samaritan House, Denver Rescue Mission, Central Presbyterian Church and St. Francis Center and these interviews will be included in the analysis. Included in the interviews were Ray Ball, a coordinator at Denver Rescue Mission, Sarina Voigh at Samaritan House and the executive director of St. Francis Center, Thomas Luher. Each of the

interviewees gave me general information, recommendations and the situations of the homeless as well as an overview of their own facilities.

Having the opportunity to meet and talk to homeless people on an individual basis was more real than their statistical information in books and journals. It gave me an opportunity to understand their feelings, to know what kind of world they are living in, and what they are going through.

Since the research was not positivist research, and the subjects were human beings, the reliability is not easy to judge. An unstructured interview such as my study does not provide a data that can be easily quantified and the outcome of the investigation can not be manipulated to test the hypothesis. The data can not be duplicated as we can in quantitative research. Discussion of validity and reliability in qualitative research is not focused on measurement. Rather the reliability and validity of such research are the responsibility of the researcher. For example, how accurate and careful he or she is in data collecting, analyzing and the data interpretation. Therefore, for this study, I tried as hard as I could to make it more reliable by using multiple methods of data collection such as tape recorder, taking field notes, and checking notes many times. Also, by seeing and talking to some of those whom I interviewed more than once, I observed participants during the interview, and observed and talked to many others after the interview. In addition, I checked reliability of the research by

comparing my findings and data with other researchers such as James Franklin and Karin Ringheim. The findings and the data of the study correlates and has similarities with research done by James and Ringheim.

In order to maximize the validity of the research, I tried to spend more time with the participants. I engaged in natural and informal conversation with the participants in order to make them feel comfortable in telling their stories in regard to their homelessness. This natural and informal approach allowed me to get more details about their situation. During the research, I even developed friendships with some of the homeless single men whom I did interview. All of the interviews were read and analyzed. Over all, the findings are promising in terms of reliability when compared with the findings of James Franklin, Karin Ringheim, and James Wright.

Finally, I tried to analyze the findings, so that they could be used as reference for those who may be interested in the subject in the future.

Respondents were from a diverse group with different work experiences, education and family backgrounds. Eight were whites, four were blacks, and one was a Native American. All the respondents claimed that they had had jobs before they became homeless. A majority of them were in low paying and low skilled jobs, five were previously married and three of the five were chronic alcoholics. The reasons for being homeless among all the respondents almost

were the same.

I have changed the names of the homeless people I interviewed in order to ensure confidentiality.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE FINDINGS**

Between January 1996 and April 1997 thirteen single homeless men were interviewed. The age of interviewees ranged from 19 to 54 years. Besides the homeless persons whom I formally interviewed at length, I talked to many other homeless people during my research as well and took field notes. The homeless single men whom I did interview were from a diverse group within different geographical locations of Denver. Each participant was asked to tell why he became homeless.

The participation was voluntary, and interviewees were not known to me before the interviews. Four were interviewed in the shelters, eight on the streets, and one whom I developed friendship with during the study was interviewed on the street and at home as well. They all were informed about the nature of the study as well as the confidentiality of the data. The method of the data collection was field notes and some tape recordings with the respondent's permission.

For maintaining the participant's confidentiality, their names and some of their characteristics have been changed.

The purpose of the study was to explore main reasons for being homeless

according to the perspectives of the men interviewed. It is entirely possible that there were other reasons which the interviewees were unwilling or unable to disclose to me; never the less, it is valuable to hear the views of the homeless about whom others have such strong opinions.

After completing the interviews, reading the transcriptions several times, and listening to the tape recordings again and again, I analyzed the findings. The findings are based on the collected data from the interviews without much manipulation. In addition, these findings may not represent or reflect the whole picture of the homeless and the situation accurately. The following section of findings of the study is from the thirteen participants who were asked to tell why they became homeless:

Table 5 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the thirteen men.

Table 5  
Demographic characteristics of the sample

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	Percent of the sample (# of persons)
<b>Race</b>	
Whites	62 (8)
blacks	30 (4)
Others	8 (1)
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	8 (1)
25-35	15 (2)
36-45	46 (6)
46-50	23 (3)
Above 50	8 (1)
<b>Education</b>	
No education	15 (2)
Some education	15 (2)
High school drop outs	23 (3)
High school graduate	23 (3)
Some college	15 (2)
College graduate	8 (1)
<b>Marital status</b>	
Previously married	39 (5)
Never married	61 (8)
<b>Residency</b>	
In-state	39 (5)
<u>Out of state</u>	<u>61 (8)</u>

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Respondents were from a diverse group with different backgrounds, four were

blacks, eight were whites and one was a native American. Among the participants, four persons were high school graduates, two of these people had post high school education, one had a GED, another one a bachelors degree in education. Two stated that they did not have any education, three were high school drop outs and the remaining had some education. Although many claimed they had problems at home before they became homeless, only two individuals reported harsh treatment and sexual abuse at home.

All of them claimed that they had previous jobs before they became homeless, two had previously worked at professional jobs. One of the two was teaching education and history for twenty years in Virginia. Three of the men had been employed for more than three years, the remaining ten people did not have high-skilled jobs and they had been mostly in construction and in other physical types of work before they became homeless.

Out of the thirteen respondents, five of them were from Colorado and the remaining eight were from other parts of the United States now living in the Denver area. Most of those from Colorado were homeless due to job loss and lack of housing. The out- of- state homeless claimed that they came to Colorado in search of better life and opportunities, but due to lack of jobs and their skills, they could not fulfill their dreams. After failing to obtain jobs and pay rent, they ended up on the streets. As the respondent number two said, " we have been cheated by the big name of Colorado, where are the jobs that people were talking about?

Colorado has its own problems. People can not easily get a job at Burger King."

Two of the respondents indicated that they were using both drugs and alcohol, and one of the two indicated that he is chemically dependent and does everything necessary to obtain drugs and alcohol. Eleven of the participants admitted that they were using alcohol, three of these considered themselves to be chronic alcoholics.

Only two of the respondents claimed that they didn't consume drugs or drink alcohol. Five were previously married and all of them had grown up children, the remaining eight, were single and they never were married. Four of those who were previously married did not have any relationships or contact with their ex-wives or their children. Participant number one has not seen his two children and his ex-wife in five years. He indicated that his ex-wife had the custody of the children, and the \$500 which he receives from the government goes to his ex-wife directly.

Participant nine claimed that he has not seen his daughter in two years, but did not elaborate whether he pays any child support or not. Only respondent number twelve indicated that he has a close relationship with his children, and he often sees his daughter and son, but he did not say if he helped them financially. This individual whom I interviewed in Samaritan House where he was residing, told me that he is working to save some money in order to attend his son's wedding.

The participants who had been married before did not have any companions or girlfriends. Among the singles, three of them had girlfriends and the girlfriends

were present during the interviews. One of the participants, number thirteen whom I developed a friendship with during the study, got married, but he lost his wife to alcohol. "I lost my wife, she drank a lot, I always told her, she didn't listen. She lost her liver to alcohol and died."

Five of the men were critical of the services provided by the shelters for the homeless. These people complained that they could not stand the firm regulations of the shelters, and they preferred to sleep on the streets. The shelters did not allow alcohol I presume, because they were heavy drinkers and they indicated they could not stay without alcohol, they probably had to leave. One mentioned that most of the places usually give them "coffee and sandwiches, but in return, we have to attend church services." This individual did not elaborate on the issue whether he was against attending the church services or not. Respondent eleven also had complaints, not about the services provided by the shelters or their regulation, but he indicated that "there is no room for privacy. I eat sandwiches in Denver Rescue Mission, but I sleep wherever possible, mostly on the streets." Most of the respondents, however, did not have many complains, except that overcrowding in the shelters concerned them.

A majority of the homeless whom I interviewed were not in good health. For example, respondent number three, Nick, who was working as a furniture mover back in California three years ago, had knee and back problems. He claimed, "I not only didn't get compensation for my injuries, but I got fired." Respondent

number five, Rodney, who was originally from Colorado Springs, had a broken arm due to an argument with his roommate over the rent money. Respondent number four had diabetes as well as a hypertension problem. Even during the interview he asked me if I could buy him some vodka to ease his pain (of course, I refused to buy him alcohol) and claimed that he could not get his medicine due to lack of money. Respondent number six, Marvan, had fat tumors on his both hands and claimed that he has had them for a few years and they do not bother him. One of the respondents, number ten, an ex-teacher to whom I talked to in St. Francis Center was disabled and he was on five different kinds of medication.

Although respondents defined their situation in different words, and they had different circumstances, a majority of them had the similar reasons for becoming homeless. Bryan tried to explain his situation by saying, "I am an alcoholic, I was not a real alcoholic before the incident, when I shot a man over a traffic dispute fifteen years ago, but I drank and went to bars." Then, he said when he got out of prison he began drinking more and eventually his wife could not handle his drinking problem and kicked him out.

Paul, in describing his experience as a homeless man, mentioned economics, losing his girlfriend and low paying jobs as the beginning of his problems. For him, homelessness was not a choice, it just happened due to circumstances.

Rodney expressed his situation in this way: " I have started my life with bad

experiences, I have been drinking since the age of eleven and I still keep going on it. There are many reasons for my situation, but the worst that changed my life probably forever was my stepfather, he raped me repeatedly." His story tells of an abusive and very challenging childhood.

When the respondents, Bob, Karl, Paul and Bryan were talking about their divorce, they experienced tension and they were in general quiet during the interview. For Karl, the death of his father and ill-health of his mother had a negative impact on his life. He went on to say that "my father died when I was sixteen, we were close. When he was around, I tried not to do bad things, like drinking, doing drugs, etc. By the time my father passed away, I began to hang around corners more and spent more times on the streets. I started smoking, doing pot, sleep on the corners and that really was the beginning of the problem."

Alex , who said, "I have control of my life" complained about how rent and other expenses are high. When he was asked if he was homeless due to economic problems in general, he replied, "Oh, yes, definitely." It was obvious that the economic situation was a the major factor, however, Alex had other reasons for being homeless as many other homeless people have. He said that he is from a rich family, but he does not relate to them. "I grew up sissy and I wanted to experience a rougher life."

Respondent number nine went on to say, "after the divorce, I chose this life style. Before, I had to work five to seven days a week, and then come home and

watch television, and later whatever I had worked for, I had to pay it for rent and other bills."

After having read, interpreted and analyzed the data from the accounts given for this study, It is clear that there are multiple reasons for this group of people to become homeless.

In this study, I found that the reasons for being homeless among single homeless men in Denver were: substance abuse, family problems, high cost of living, lack of skills, lack of jobs and, lack of education as well as the homeless' own attitude and behavioral problems. However, the primary reasons among this group were economic conditions and the high cost of living, alcohol and drug problems (substance abuse) and family issues. Table six summarizes the multiple reasons of homelessness among the single homeless men interviewed in Denver.

Table 6  
Multiple reasons for being homeless

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>Percent of the Sample (# of persons)</u>
Economic/ Lack of Jobs	77 (10)
Family Issues	54 (7)
Substance Abuse	54 (7)
High Rent and expenses	46 (6)
Mental illness/disabilities	23 (3)
<u>Life style</u>	15 (2)

The rest of this chapter will cover the major contributing factors to

homelessness among the sample. In addition, homelessness as a life style which many people may believe is a major factor will be discussed.

### Economics and High Cost of Living

Ten of the participants complained that they can't get a job due to lack of skills and lack of available jobs. Some stated firmly that not only their experiences, but "lack of jobs; period!" had pushed them to the edge. Some of the people, according to themselves, were still working on odd jobs, but indicated that these were temporary daily paying jobs. Even if they could work full time, they doubted that they could afford their rent and other basic needs.

Seven of them complained about high rent and the high cost of living. They believed that the cost of living, low paying jobs, high rent, not only were major contributing factors to their own homelessness and pushed them to the edge, but were important for many other homeless people as well. Two were evicted from their apartments and reported landlord-tenant conflict. These two stated that a sudden rise of their rents led them to be temporarily homeless.

Economic conditions definitely not only are related to the rise and fall of the number of the homeless people in Denver, Colorado, but they are the major contributing factor of being homeless among the 13 interviewed. Low paying jobs for these unskilled and low income people who can not afford to live a decent life has to be taken seriously among state and federal authorities. How can many low income people obtain their basic needs when the prices dramatically have gone up

and the wages either are the same or may have increased by only a small margin. To make this argument clearer, an example can be helpful. In 1990, I lived in a studio apartment on Washington Street and first Avenue for \$220 while working as cashier in Seven-Eleven for \$5.50 an hour. Today, the rent for the same apartment is \$360. I have to add that the apartments have neither been renewed nor decorated. But, if I go back and work as a cashier again, I will make \$ 5.75 to \$ 6 an hour. It is true that minimum wage has increased, but still is not in balance with the higher cost of living. Thomas Luhers, the executive director of the St. Francis Center, also believes the cause of the homelessness is a combination of many reasons. He stated that economics is one of the major causes of homelessness. "People no longer can afford their rents and other expenses with minimum wage. Working in McDonald can not be enough for providing basic needs. This is a really big issue, but it seems nothing has been done about this problem."

The findings of the research that economic conditions are at the root of the problem supports the argument made by Ringheim (1994). She argued that homelessness is most frequently a result of a mismatch between the cost of living and the income of the poor. This finding also supports the idea by Wright and Lam (1987) when they claimed that homelessness is housing problems. However, I have to add that if people are economically stable and secure, then the housing will not

be a major problem as it is now.

### Substance Abuse

Although most of the respondents reported that they drink alcohol, seven of them were heavy drinkers. Among the seven, four of them indicated that alcohol was the major reason for their homelessness and these people also believed that there was no hope for their recovery. When I asked respondent number one if he was alcoholic before he became homeless, he responded, "I am an alcoholic. I wasn't really an alcoholic before, but I drank and went to bars." Three of the homeless had some sort of illness and behavioral problems. One of the three blamed his sickness (diabetes) for being an alcoholic: "I drink to ease my pain." Alex, one of the homeless whom I interviewed, stated that not all the homeless are alcoholic or mentally sick, "May be a few are crazy, and I think being homeless may caused them more mental problem."

Substance abuse and mental illness among homeless people is the area in which most of the victim-blaming of the homeless persons tend to occur. Of course, there are homeless people who use drugs and drink alcohol, but one has to consider their situations and research the root of the problem rather than stigmatize them. The root of the problem may be the economic situation they are in, family problems, lack of social bonding, etc. The data I have collected about the use of alcohol and drugs among the homeless do not agree with the idea of those

who may believe that the homeless are bunch of drug addicts who sleep on the doorways, in parks and in other abandoned places. The homeless are not only those whom we see on the streets. There are many homeless people that are hidden and do not want to be seen because they already know how they are going to be judged.

Alcohol and drugs problems are not only seen among the homeless population. There are those who always have cocktail parties, drink, and dance all night and consider their drinking behavior as recreational? It is true that some homeless damaged their mental and physical condition as a result of drinking alcohol, but we have to reveal and find out why they are consuming too much alcohol instead of only criticizing them.

Bill, one the homeless whom I interviewed during the research, stated that "homeless people can not go to picnic or movie, they don't have a damn place to go, then what they do, is drinking and drinking. Also, in order to sleep on the hard cement you have to knock yourself down with alcohol. Have you slept on a hard cement? You should try it. It is so hard that you can not handle it for ten minutes."

Bill's statements were about the realities of his life; we may not internalize his statements and his experience deeply until we experience his life. Here, I am not defending a drinking problem, rather criticizing those who may penalize this group of people without any consideration and in-depth understanding.

During my research I observed many homeless on the streets and on the banks of the creeks, and I saw many of those who were drinking alcohol and how they reacted to their surroundings. Based on my observations and experiences, I assume that alcohol consumption may also be related to masculinity. One of the respondents number seven, was enjoying drinking his beer during the interview. With loud sounds and excitement he stated that "I am a free man, I am an American and I want to be free." Of course, I am not a psychologist to evaluate his emotions or to find out what was going on in his mind. However, what I know is, we have to be fair on our judgments and alcohol may reduce their pain, in their opinion.

As I understand, environment and cultural setting play a big role in people's attitude and behavior. In a culture where men have to be strong and tough, and it is not normal for them, for example, to cry or show their emotions, alcohol may help them to hide their feelings, and possibly they ease their pains on their own without forcing them to ask others for help.

### Family Issues

Family issues such as relationships and domestic conflict were important issues among the homeless. Although twelve out of thirteen people had families and relatives who were living, only three of the respondents had some limited contact with any of them. Seven of them indicated that they had a domestic conflict and family problems at home. They believed that these family problems with a

combination of other factors such as losing jobs, use of drugs, high rents, etc., were the reasons which pushed them to be the way they are, homeless. Five in the sample who were previously married believed that their divorce led to a deterioration in their life. Respondent number ten stated in regard to his divorce and its effect on his life that "I was married for many years, then the relationship went wrong for many reasons. We got a divorce and after that my life changed forever." At first, this person blamed his wife and the divorce for the whole situation, then he paused for a few seconds and said, "I think I am guilty as anybody else." Respondent number twelve also blamed his divorce and economic problems for his situation. Interviewee number nine stated that "after divorce I chose this life style. Before, I worked hard, but I did get nowhere." As I found out, those who were divorced were still suffering from their separation and the divorce. Those who were previously married were more depressed, insecure and often talked of how homeless people have to deal with loneliness. As I understood, after their separation, these people faced a new challenge of life, to cope with their new life style and loss of their attachments. I presume that they could not accept and adapt to the new life style they were in. Therefore, lack of attachments and isolation led them to drink alcohol and use drugs in order to ease their pain. Gradually, their substance abuse got out of control, and one thing led to another. As their drinking became a habit, they lost the sense of responsibility leading to job

loss and other problems. Finally, they ended up as a part of the homeless population.

Nowadays, due to higher stress and many other reasons such as economic pressure and the higher cost of living and other every day problems, family bonding is weak. Beside the socio-economic reasons, it shouldn't be surprising to see family members in conflict with one another. Families are more concerned and busy with their own individual lives. For example, how to obtain a job, or simply how to survive, and most of all how to cope with stress and the pressure that society has created for them.

Family problems such as domestic violence and divorce more often occurs among the segment of the society in which people struggle to have a simple living. All the interviewees who said that their marriage ended in divorce blamed the economic conditions more than anything else for their separations. Two of the individuals who were abused at home during their teens also came from poor families. Respondent number four stated that "I have started my life with a bad experience, my stepfather repeatedly raped me from the early age on. I ran away many times, but I ended up at the same place that I should not be." Respondent number three claimed that he grew up with his mother who was working as a janitor in California and continued to say "I never knew my father."

Thomas Luhers the executive director of the St. Francis Center whom I interviewed during the research stated that "family is a big factor among homeless,

the family bonding no longer works. Family members can easily be kicked out of the home. This usually happens among the families that are not in a good economic standing. In regard to relationships and how they may be a major reason for people to become homeless he gave an example. I have a woman here, in St. Francis Center, named Julie, you never believe she is homeless. She is well-dressed, clean and carries herself with dignity and pride, but she is homeless, and this is the way she became homeless: She is originally from Illinois, I often talk to her mom. As I understand, she had a very respectable job, she used to be an executive director for a major and a well-known company and she held a managerial job in Sears. She was engaged to a man to be married, but the man she was supposed to get married to, walked out of her life on the same day. She then, became depressed, but continued to work her regular jobs. As time passed, she became more depressed and finally, she quit her jobs and gradually her situation led her to be the way she is right now. Her depression is so strong that she is developing a mental health problem."

#### Homelessness as a Life Style

Four of the interviewees indicated that homelessness meant freedom to them, independence and a life of adventure, but only two of them mentioned that homelessness is a life style that they didn't want to leave it. One of these two, respondent number seven, was a heavy drinker and mentioned that he has not slept

in the shelter and never will. Respondent number one is a chronic alcoholic and according to him there is no hope for his recovery. Respondent number eight stated, "I grew up sissy and I wanted to experience a rougher life. Do you know? Since I don't have any responsibilities such as wife, kids, etc., I like to goof off and travel around. Nobody can die of hunger, there is plenty of food to eat." I asked respondent number seven how if he can work if there is now a job available, he replied, "I can't, I don't want to work, I can't quit my job as homeless. It is free, you can do anything you want, I want to be free and being homeless means freedom."

Here, although there are some homeless men that see homelessness as a life style, based on my experience with the homeless during this study, they did not choose to be homeless. Two of the four who indicated homelessness is a life style had mental disabilities due to substance abuse, and the other two were situationally homeless and indicated that they will get out of the situation. These findings do not reflect or support the data given by some who may argue that the homeless want to be there on the streets by choice. Samuel Pierce, Secretary of HUD during Ronald Reagan and Bush's presidency, claimed that seventy percent of the homeless on the streets wanted to be there (Sweeney, 1993).

The reasons of being homeless among whites and others were the same. However, among the white homeless, family issues such as relationships and divorce seemed to be another important contributing factor to their homelessness.

The problem of alcohol and drugs was also the same among all the homeless. Black homeless men were more willing to stay in the shelters while a majority of white homeless men were interested in residing outside the shelters. I assume that the black homeless did not feel safe to camp or reside outside because they were not in groups as the white homeless men were. The homeless whom I interviewed in the shelters were more conscious of their situations. They did not want to be on the streets, and they stated they do everything possible to stay in shelters as long as they are homeless. These homeless in the shelters claimed they drink occasionally and they have control over their drinking. On the other hand, those whom I interviewed on the streets had different opinions and perspectives toward homeless shelters, drugs, alcohol, and life in general. Three of the chronic alcoholics were on the streets, and those who mentioned homelessness as a life style were on the streets as well. However, the reasons for being homeless among those on the streets and in the shelters were not that much different. To all the homeless, lack of skills was another important issue. During the research, I did not see a close bond between the black and white homeless. The black homeless were mostly isolated whereas the whites homeless were in groups.

Among the group, five of them considered themselves as chronic homeless as a result of substance abuse. Three out of the five indicated that there is no hope for them to go back to their previous life. The three had some mental as well as

physical disabilities. Individuals number one, seven, and ten were chronic alcoholics and treatment for their conditions has not been successful. When I asked respondent number seven that if therapy and other support groups can help him to get out of the situation, he replied, "No, I have already spent \$ 35,000 on treatments in the past and they did not work." Besides the alcohol problem, respondent number ten had a back injury and he was on five different kinds of medication. He indicated that " I can not work, I am disabled as well as I am an alcoholic." Six of them considered themselves as situationaly homeless and I believed if help is given they would get out of the situation. I also have to add that five of the participants were working on odd jobs and one whom I interviewed at Samaritan house was working full time.

### Summary and Conclusion

The reasons for being homeless among single homeless men in Denver were many; however, economics which brings poverty and other social problems such as crime and domestic violence was the leading factor. The other major contributing factors were substance abuse and family problems. A majority of the homeless in the sample came from poor families with a lack of assets, education and financial opportunities. The homeless people did not have family support and also did not have friends outside of the homeless circle. Their friends were also homeless themselves and could not offer any help.

This study did not suggest that homeless' laziness and their own behavior are

the leading factors of homelessness. More research is needed to determine if any correlation exists between laziness and homelessness. However, substance abuse among the homeless was a major factor as many researchers have already found. Economy, lack of education, housing problems and increasing rent were also other reasons which many researchers such as Wright (1988), Ringheim (1993) and Jahiel (1992) have already talked about.

The results of this study were somehow consistent with the results found by previous researchers in the literature review, however, what I found that has not been taken seriously by the previous researchers, in comparison with other factors, is family problems such as domestic violence and relationships. The finding of the research correlates with research done by Franklin James (1995). Based on his research, economics was the most important factor that has to be addressed.

The conclusion of my findings is compatible with the view that deteriorating economic conditions experienced by a member of this group is the primary result of social structural reasons rather than the group pathology, laziness and an individual's own behavioral problem as many people may argue.

The findings of the research support Rosenthal's argument (1994) that homelessness is not the result of individual irresponsibility or incompetence. Homeless people are mainly drawn from a large group who are already in a very poor financial situation. The research also supports the findings of Clasy and

Roades (1994) when they argue that the low income and education lead to homelessness. However, my findings do not support Lamb and Talbot's (1986) idea that mental illness causes homelessness. Mental illness exists among homeless single men in Denver, but due to the fact that their illness is more hidden and mostly non-violent, it is very difficult to estimate what percent of this population is mentally ill. Mental illness, no doubt is a contributing factor, but it is not as important and noticeable as the economic one, or as the high cost of living, as the use of alcohol and as the family conflict. To categorize the homeless as mentally sick or to believe if the mental illness is the major contributing factor, more studies are needed. Studies of the homeless have not investigated mental illness among homeless as other aspects of their situations. This is due to the fact that few psychological tests have been validated on the homeless people.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **SERVICES PROVIDED FOR DENVER'S HOMELESS**

This chapter will discuss the agencies that provide help for Denver's homeless which I visited during my research. The information in this chapter is mostly given by coordinators and the directors of homeless shelters where I visited during the research. Also, some recommendations and predictions will be given in regard to the homeless issues.

Throughout Denver, the primary sources of services for the homeless are provided through churches and other non-profit agencies. With decreasing federal aid, help now must come from the private sectors and public to assist homeless. Among the agencies that provide help for homeless, I visited, were Denver Rescue Mission, Central Presbyterian Church, St. Francis Center and Samaritan House.

Denver Rescue Mission is a Colorado non-profit corporation which provides food, shelter, clothing, education and rehabilitation for homeless. More than 1000 people receive food from the Rescue Mission through eight distribution points. It can shelter 110 men and 40 women each night. More than 250 individuals are assisted with rent, utilities and money for transportation.

The mission has 100- acre harvest farm north of Fort Collins which provides fresh products and meat for residents and others in the food distribution network. Usually men are sent to the farm by decision of the Denver rescue Mission program director to help on the farm. The Mission has 30 full time members, but a lot of work comes from volunteers. Its support comes from individual and private donation about 98%, and local churches (2%).

Central Presbyterian Shelter which is a non-profit, tax exempt organization, helps single homeless men only. It assists homeless men with emergency shelter, meals, counseling, job referrals and assists them in locating apartments. The center opened in November 1986 at the request of the city and county of Denver. Each year, more than 1200 men are helped by this emergency shelter. In late 1994, 87 percent of the shelter residents were working men. The time limit that an individual can stay is 70 days. The shelter typically serves on the basis of first come and first serve due to space limitation and a high number of applicants.

I interviewed Thomas Luhers, the executive director of St. Francis Center on 7th of Agust1996 in regard to their services for homeless people in Denver. He was very delightful and cooperative in giving all the needed information in regard to their services for homeless. According to Luhers, this is what their Center provide:

St. Francis Center is the only day shelter for homeless men, women and families in Denver. Its clients are 90% single men, 10%, on the other hand, are women, and there is no restriction for the families. The clients are from diverse group in terms of race, education and work backgrounds. Each day about 400 to 500 people are served by the center. Without this shelter many homeless, especially those in need of mental health care, alcohol and drug education, job training or employment service, would be out on the street during the day. The center assists homeless in obtaining information about Denver Department of Social Services Agencies. It provides direct help, such as counseling, in obtaining bus tokens and other help for its clients. There are also nurses on the staffs to provide basic health care six days a week.

St. Francis Center has shower facilities for both women and men. It provides towels, soaps, shampoo and other basic needs. About 100 to 150 people use the showers each day. It has storage space to hold the belongings of up to 450 people. There are telephones, a private message service and a mailing address to help the homeless to contact their family, friends and their employer. The center sends and receives messages for the homeless too. Although there has been a cut in funding, the center provides education, adult learning which provides clients with GED job training, help in finding jobs for the clients. In addition, St. Francis collaborates with many private and public agencies to link

homeless with health clinics, long-term employment and with job skill training.

It helps homeless veterans through Veteran's Administration and Department of Public Health.

Luhers added that St. Francis Center, which has been there for homeless for 13 years, reached 121,000 individuals in 1994. In the same year the Center assisted 3,874 with food stamps, 2,520 with employment and assisted 4,228 individuals with health care. It also helped 9,062 individuals with clothing. In the last six months the center has provided jobs for 160 homeless persons. The center operates with help of private donors, churches and occasionally from the city. The state has not been a part of help and it may not be ever in the future. There are about 80 volunteers to assist in all of the section of the shelter.

I visited Samaritan House on August 13, 1996, and interviewed Sarina Voigh, a coordinator for the shelter. During the interview, which last about 60 minute and seeing the shelter in person, I obtained the following information about Samaritan House and its services: The Samaritan House which was built in 1986, it is one of the nation's major shelters designed for the homeless. The center provides help and houses more than 300 women, men and children. It has 124 beds and more than 69 mattresses in case of "overflow" which it is always possible. It serves its residents with beds, food, clothing and basic health care for more than 30 days. Samaritan house also provides laundry, showers and

storage. It houses 20 families at a time for up to three months. According to Voigh, at the end of 90 days the families leave the center, and by the help of volunteers some obtain jobs and some enter transitional housing programs such as one at Lowery Air Force base. The residents stay there for about two years and during their residency there, they pay only 30 percent of their income toward rent. Single men can stay at Samaritan house for 30 days, but their residency may be expanded if they get a job and they really want to change their life in a positive way.

The center has a diverse population of homeless. About one third of the male residents are veterans. Many of them suffer chronic mental problems, some have drug and alcohol problems. More than 65 percent of the single men reside there have either alcohol or drug problems.

Samaritan house provides homeless with information and referrals to local social service agencies. It also helps and provides children and teenagers living there with offering educational and other social activities. It helps Denver's homeless with counseling, employment ,job training and job referral. The center offers classes in English, writing and other basic life skills. The volunteers try to boast up the homeless' self-esteem and their dignity. It also helps mentally disordered veterans through the psychiatric unit of veteran hospital with evaluation and intensive psychotherapy. Job training, group activities,

professional counseling and spiritual guidance is provided for the homeless by the shelter.

Samaritan house gets its help from the community through money, food, clothing, personal care items contributions and volunteers. More than 300 people donate their time and energy to help Samaritan house. The volunteers are from diverse groups with different background in terms of skills, education, etc.

### Recommendations and Predictions

In order to reduce the homeless problem, first and most of all, new policies are needed to improve employment opportunities and secure job availabilities. Communities have to be involved and be active with governmental housing policies to reduce the crisis. People should push for more practical and feasible change rather than focusing on theories. Services for the homeless people should be in a fixed geographical location, so that the homeless can meet their needs. Raising the wages and reducing rents, and giving more power to the tenants may help. The landlords have so much power in the state that they can kick any tenant out at any time. Controlling rents and reducing some of the power that landlords have will help in reducing the number of the homeless in the state of Colorado.

The gap between income of the poor and their housing as well as the gap between the rich and the poor should be closer than it is. This is a major

problem not only in Denver, but in the United States.

Homeless people have to be helped to obtain their basic needs such as food, clothing, housing and health care. A majority of the homeless people do not have transportation to access to services, work or in emergency circumstances. Providing transportation does not solve the problem, but it certainly will help to ease the problem.

Maximizing use of local, federal, and private allocations, will probably reduce the numbers of homeless population. To maximize the allocation, authorities on the federal and the local level have to take the homeless crisis seriously. But no solution can be as effective as getting rid of poverty, the root of the problem. The homeless population needs more hospital services and mental institutions. Physicians and psychologists should evaluate homeless people's capabilities to see if they are able to work or not. If the homeless are not in good health, medical care should be provided for their recovery. After recovery and treatment, the homeless themselves have to take some responsibility to change their life around and get out of the situation. They can not and should not rely only on others for help.

As I have mentioned above, the main root of homelessness is poverty. Poverty is created by the fact that a portion of the population can not compete in the capitalistic society. Factors that contribute to poverty which leads to

homelessness and other social, and behavioral problems such as robbery, substance abuse, and domestic violence are many. However, the major factor can be unjust distribution of available resources among people, and also the widened gap between the rich and the poor. Poverty exists due to the fact that many people grew up in poor families with no assets, education and skills. These people will not be able to compete in a technological society where demand is only for high skilled and technically available labor. There is no simple solution to homeless crisis, but to get rid of the homeless and homelessness requires the elimination of poverty, and the only way that may be possible through the transference of social change.

Finally, from a public policy perspective, prevention for those at risk to the world of homelessness is the most important step to take. And for those who already have fallen into the situation, emergency as well as permanent housing, health care, and jobs have to be made available to them.

I am not a pessimistic person, but when it comes to homeless problem, I just can not see the problem going away. First of all, as long as drug and alcohol are easy access, we are going to have social problems such as homelessness. Secondly, as long as there are many poor people for whom income does not match their expenses, homelessness will exist.

During the study I talked to many people who were working in lower

paying jobs to find out about their income and their expenses. A majority of cashiers, retailers, security guards, restaurant workers, etc. start with \$5.00 to \$ 6.25 an hour. If they work full time, they will probably bring home about \$ 700 to \$ 750 a month. On the other hand, a small one bedroom apartment in Denver averages about \$430, and taking into account other expenses, an individual making \$700 a month would be lucky to live through the month. Therefore, based on this data, I am not very optimistic about the situation of the homeless and poor people as a whole. Thirdly, domestic violence is a major factor for being homeless especially among women, and as long as this problem is not resolved, the state will have more homeless people in the future.

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